

THE FIRE
UNDER THE
BLANKET



The Fire Under the Blanket by Vespaer

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Summary: Joyce Byers x Jim Hopper, spoilers for the s3 finale. This is a story about grief and regret. This is a story about unspoken words, and risks that should have been taken. Joyce Byers attends a class reunion where she confronts all of the things that Jimmy Hopper was to her, and all he never got to be. She'd been so afraid of losing him... and yet she lost him anyway.

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"Come on, Joycie, it'll be fun!"

The words were still ringing between her ears long after she'd checked in at the motel. Long after she'd dropped off the kids, long after she'd left the supermarket... long after she'd plopped her knees down on one of the floor mats from her car to rip away the weeds that had started to crop up around his headstone. Morning glories were pretty, and a fine and strangely fitting epithet to the man, her old friend... but they also greedily choked off all other forms of life. Not at all unlike the vicious monstrosities he'd sacrificed himself to stop.

"Don't you think you deserve a little fun, after... you know. Everything? Come on. The whole gang'll be there. Don't make me face them by myself."

It was Memorial Day weekend, and she'd hoped to fly under the radar. She'd brought her family back to Hawkins for a visit, but with only two bullet points on the checklist. After their business was concluded she'd planned to, with as little fanfare as possible, point their wheels back toward the highway west to beat a speedy exit back home before the ghosts of the past could catch up with them. She only came because she'd promised to let the children spend time with their friends and enjoy a weekend of summer fun. That was bullet point number one.

The other was that she'd planned to tend to Jim Hopper's grave.

"You don't want to forget all about us, do you? Now that you're a big city girl again?"

She tugged at the strangling vines hard enough they nearly cut into her palms. Damned things.

There was so much she wanted to forget. And still more she needed to keep. Deciding what to yank away and what to let thrive inside

her mind... that was the harder question.

A distant peal of thunder sat her back on her haunches. She sighed as a late spring stormy breeze lifted a strand of hair across her nose. Earthy, grass-stained fingers pulled the thing away as her eyes swept across the field of mounded burial plots where they lay against a backdrop of purple, turgid, brewing anvil clouds. Hop's final resting place was so flat by comparison, consisting of nothing more than the stone itself and the unbroken ground it crowned, but she liked to think the plot captured at least a fragment of his essence. The marker that bore his name, some loving sentiments, and a short list of accolades given to him during his line of service as both a war veteran and a police officer lay shaded by a mature weeping willow. It whispered sweetly in the wind like old songs and stupid jokes - the subtle things that had once defined him. Beyond that was a stellar view of the local diner where he'd sometimes enjoyed getting a cup of coffee and a donut before beginning his rounds. He'd been an institution there.

"I mean, you have to come. What are the odds you decided to visit the same weekend? It's fate, isn't it?"

Joyce Byers rolled her eyes. The odds were really good actually. It wasn't that big of a coincidence, and it certainly wasn't fate. Memorial Day weekend was a common weekend to plan all sorts of activities. Things like family trips. *And* class reunions. It didn't have to mean anything. She knew what the woman had been trying to do. She'd been trying to appeal to Joyce Byers' infamous quirky nature. But it wasn't going to work, not this time.

She just wanted to let this weekend pass with peace and dignity. She just wanted her kids to go to the movies and eat ice cream and play board games. She just wanted to lounge by the motel pool while Jonathan and Nancy took themselves out for a nice dinner and some time alone. She just wanted to have a picnic lunch and cook hot dogs in the park. She wanted to sip lemonade or a cold beer, and eat chips straight out of the bag. She wanted a break from packing school lunches and doing laundry. It was summer. It was a three day weekend.

She did not want to run into an old class mate at the 7-11 on the

edge of town. In her effort to avoid looking at the ubiquitous Slurpee machine on her way to the register with her six pack of Coke, she'd locked eyes with Peggy instead. And before she could smile and nod the way she had once to a Russian soldier, she ended up half-heartedly agreeing to make an appearance at the Hawkins High School Reunion for the Classes of 1960 and 61. There had been some contention over doubling up, but her graduating class had apparently tried to plan their event for the summer before only to wind up thwarted by the very regrettable fire at the Starcourt Mall.

No one had felt like celebrating after that.

The wind started to pick up, and the first patter of rain drops began to dot the grey-pink granite slab that reduced the whole of Jim Hopper's existence down to a single stone block as if there was nothing more to know about the man.

Like how blue his eyes could be when he was plotting something devious.

Like how they would crinkle at the corners every time he laughed at himself.

Or how he'd turn them inward when he was being torn apart by thoughts he wouldn't share.

Like how stubborn he was. Or how sentimental.

Like how he had an unspoken talent for making sense out of chaos... even if he made the chaos. But especially when he didn't.

And how he was born with this preternatural ability to make a person feel... safe.

She smoothed her hand over the gilded metal plaque that spelled out his life so inadequately. But instead of the soft brush of his beard or the plump warmth of his skin that usually met her hand when it found its way to his face, she was met only by cold, brassy, unsatisfying bronze.

Perhaps an evening with old friends wouldn't be... so bad. It would keep her from spending her time drowning in her own thoughts. She

may no longer be able to touch her past, but perhaps through the act of sharing pictures and stories with others who had lived it she could, for the course of one night, bring it back to life.

Which lead her to later stand and stare at her pale, waxy reflection in the motel bathroom mirror. She hadn't exactly packed her bags with a high school class reunion in mind, but she did have a paisley sundress she liked - one she'd sewn together herself from an old Butterick pattern she kept in her stack of favorites. She put body in her hair with a curling iron, but kept her mascara light. Just in case. She wasn't sure what fresh hell the evening would bring, but if the emotions carving lines into her face were any indication, it was likely worth keeping her eyes neutral and passive.

Unresponsive. Dead.

Anticipation gnawed at her belly, so she grabbed her purse and her keys and she walked out the door like a death row inmate making her final walk. This was something she felt she had to do, but she was ready to get it over with. Her whole life since she'd moved her family away from Hawkins had been spent keeping up the appearance of strength and fortitude. She needed to be the anchor for a young girl who was mourning the loss of her father. She needed to be the sole provider for her family. She needed to be a teacher, a mother, a nurse... a maid, a cook... an employee. She needed to keep them living. She needed to keep herself living. She needed to keep her grief at arm's length, where it couldn't cleave a crack in her porcelain mask.

Which made her afraid to face it tonight, like a duel at high noon.

It was pouring by the time she got to the old high school building. She stood in the glass foyer of the entryway trying to situate her purse so that she could reach around and wring the water out of her skirt. She was fluffing her damp hair when a streak of blinding white lightning flashed outside and made the overhead light flicker like something out of a horror movie. Or, possibly, something she'd lived through personally. But as the heady, humid odor of rain, ozone, and grass clippings began to recede beneath the icy draft of air conditioning, the antiquated aroma of nostalgia beckoned her further inside - the provocative blend of musty schoolbooks, old wood, chalk

dust, and a girls' locker room.

Peggy waved at her from her station behind the sign-in sheet, but made no move to abandon her conversation to join her. Joyce nodded and wriggled a few fingers to acknowledge the woman in return, but that was the last greeting she received from any of her old classmates. Most other folks either outright ignored her, didn't remember her, or were simply surprised to see her there at all. Which suited Joyce just fine. There weren't many in attendance who could honestly relate to the life that Joyce Byers had lived and... really... she felt the greater bulk of those people had peaked early anyway. Not that she didn't feel that her years spent in Chicago, going to college and protesting the war, hadn't been some of the most meaningful and impactful work she'd done in her life. She just... knew things people didn't know. About the world, about the Universe.

And the one that shared a very thin border with it.

For some reason, she felt that afforded her greater potential. It made everything else in Hawkins, Indiana just seem... so small by comparison. Insignificant. Which was precisely how her classmates in the Hawkins High School Class of 1960 viewed her.

Joyce Byers, who'd been Joyce Landry at the time, had always been a bit of an anomaly. Her parents used to throw swinger parties and grow pot in the back garden. They used to keep bees and chickens... inside city limits. They wore old clothing and worked odd jobs to make a living. Her father also used to collect tin and aluminum cans out of the public trash, and her mother was openly disdainful about organized religion. She'd endured rumors all of her life that her family was either transient, a bunch of homeless vagrants, or escaped mental patients. Joyce Landry had always been strange because she came from a strange family. Conventionally speaking, for the late 1950s. So the treatment wasn't exactly something she hadn't grown accustomed to a long, long time ago.

Even before she'd met Jimmy Hopper.

Which wasn't to say she hadn't always known *of* Jim Hopper. He was in her class, sure. When she was little, he was a name inside her

yearbook. But before they'd struck up their weird little friendship, he was one of those muddy little river kids that lived down a farm road - chubby and toothless with skinned knees and a baseball card collection. With a cork pop gun and a raccoon hat. He was the one running around catching bullfrogs and making the younger kids squeal.

But then there was the day she'd missed the bus home from school.

She could still remember it clearly - as clear as the panes of glass that framed all of the old pictures where they hung down the length of the long hallway, serenading her with old memories as she strolled leisurely past them alone. She trailed her finger down each one, stopping when she reached an old history teacher who'd died of a heart attack before she'd graduated. She stopped again on a photo of the old home ec room where she saw a long, lost girlfriend who'd moved away decades ago.

She found a picture of the math club. One that included Bob Newby. She lingered as she tried to recall that bright smile that had been so invisible to her in her youth. The one that had warmed her nights before the strangeness that clouded her life like a curse reached out and robbed him of his.

The last one she reached before a row of lockers rose up to block their parade was just some random shot snapped of the busy hallway, bustling on a typical school day.

And there he was.

He was far away, in the back and in motion... but she'd know his shoulders anywhere. That, and he was a good head taller than anyone else. The camera had caught him in transit, his long purposeful strides carrying him from point A to point B. It wasn't a good shot, it wasn't a clear shot... but it was unmistakably Jim Hopper. And it conveyed every sense of direction and principle that he carried with him everywhere. So, like a time traveler, her mind was transported straight back to that day. The day she'd missed the bus.

Kenny Cantrell and Lester Cox had been harassing her all day. Her

only crime had been that she'd grown up poor - her dress was worn and faded, and her shoes didn't have the shiny white patent leather that the rich girls wore. Even the fringe of lace around her ankles had obviously been a trim her mother had sewn onto dime store crew socks. That'd never been sufficient reason to deserve the amount of punishment she received at the hands of her tormentors, but the abuse had never breached a level that she hadn't considered to be tolerable... until that day.

It'd started with half-whispered jeers from the back of the classroom. Something harmless and stupid about her being from outer space followed by a lewd comment alluding the planet Uranus. But in the hallways cruel jokes had turned into bumped shoulders and hissed threats. The teasing had turned into something more dangerous. Her fear had grown into something more palpable. Visceral. Primally instinctual. But it was the warning - the promise of violence - that had sent chills down her spine.

"We're gonna get you after class today."

She'd been in seventh grade, practically a young woman. No longer naive enough to wonder what a pair of young boys would want to do to a girl like her after class. So that afternoon had found her cowering in the corner of the last stall in the girls' bathroom, instead of lining up the way she should have been, knees knocking in the crisp autumn breeze, to climb aboard the bus that would've taken her home. To this very day, the smell of liquid soap and sanitation supplies could make her queasy if she dwelled on it too long.

The tears had run down her neck and stained her collar as she'd sat there, clutching her books to her chest, watching the minute hand tick away on the clock near the ceiling between the two sinks. The two boys had howled outside the door like a hungry pack of wolves, knocking and pounding and kicking and laughing, shouting lascivious obscenities and calling her disgusting names. It'd been the roar of the revving ignition from the line of buses outside that had stoked her anger and precipitated her desperate flight for escape. She'd had all she could take.

She'd rushed the bathroom door.

She'd given the thing one giant shove, packing all of her meager body weight behind it. With a bone-crunching thud she'd felt it collide with something firm that was probably a body, but she never stopped to turn and find out. Her shoes had already been tearing down the polished hallway tiles.

Until a hand clamped down onto her elbow, hard enough to leave a bruise.

"Gotcha!" Kenny Cantrell had cheered in terrifying triumph. "Now just where do you think you're - oomph!"

She'd plunged her entire stack of books hard into his middle, driving the air out of his lungs. She'd then swung them up and cracked them beneath his chin. She'd stumbled faintly backward at the sight of the two drops of blood that'd dripped onto the floor. She was dead meat.

"You little bitch... you *little bitch!*"

She'd snapped back to her senses and whipped around leaving a dumbfounded Lester Cox to attend to his friend who'd kept one hand pressed against his bloodied lip. She'd made it just a few steps - just enough to feel the wind on her face, enough to see the light peeking through the windows on the big metal double doors that lead outside - when a hand had yanked her head backwards by her ponytail so hard that her books scattered through the air in a flutter of papers, pages, and pencils. She was slammed down onto her behind and dragged, scrambling for release, back toward the scene of her impending doom.

She'd begged. She'd pleaded. She'd whimpered and cried. But all she'd gotten was pitiless laughter.

"Now, now," Lester had told her as he'd squatted beside her, his breath hot and foul and damp in her ear, "no need to get ugly, we're just havin' a little fun. People wouldn't think you're such a freak if you smiled and relaxed a little more often."

Thinking back on it, where had all the teachers gone? Where was the janitor? Didn't the athletic coaches stay late most nights?

"Fuck that bitch," Kenny had spat, pink dribble flung from his lips in a fine, atomized mist. "Ought ta put 'er eye out!"

"I think he wants you to apologize fer -"

But then, like a sweet, silver bell, it'd echoed through the halls. Not a teacher, not a janitor, not a coach. Not even the vice principal.

"Hey! Let 'er go."

Little Jimmy Hopper.

Lester Cox had kept her hair in his hands... but got quickly to his feet, like he'd been caught stealing from the cookie jar.

"This ain't none o' yer business, Hop."

"Didn't say it was," he'd sniffed, dragging the back of his hand beneath his nose in feigned nonchalance. A signature move straight up til the day he... straight up til the day he died. "You're still gonna let her go."

"Or you'll what?"

"Yeah!" Kenny had eagerly added his voice to the choir, jutting out his chin in daring derision. "Or you'll what? Your daddy said you can't be gettin' into anymore fights!"

"Well," Jimmy'd laughed and shrugged, "he ain't here now, is he? Let her go."

"Make me," Lester had thrown down the gauntlet in challenge. Which in hindsight, and very fortunately for a very tiny seventh grade Joyce, had been a huge mistake. Little seventh grade Jimmy Hopper turned up one corner of his mouth, and he never hesitated. He'd taken two steps and rammed his fist so hard into Lester Cox's big, red, stupid face that they all could've heard his nose crack from down the hall. He'd finally let go of her hair as he clamped both hands over his nose and mouth. A torrent of blood had splattered all over the floor, and Kenny Cantrell had begun to gag at the sight of it. It still made Joyce giggle. Her stomach was stronger than his.

"Y-you..." Lester had cried. Legitimately cried, the tears springing from his eyes to dilute the fountain of blood that still poured from both of his nostrils. "You broke my damn nose!"

"That's it, Hopper!" Kenny had sneered with malintent as he grabbed his friend's arm to pull him toward the exit. His eyes had squinted up and his cheeks turned pink, and his lips had curled into a wet, slimy grimace that spewed his final threat toward the two of them like a filthy piece of refuse. "You've done it now! Your daddy's gonna skin you alive!"

And then, just as quickly as it had begun... it was over. The resounding clang of the metal doors clapping shut behind them had made her jump and lift her hands to her heart. She thought she'd heard little Jimmy Hopper ask her something at the time, probably something like, "are you okay," or, "did they hurt you," but to this day she couldn't remember what. She'd never even heard him. The only thing that had kept her pinned to her awful, awful reality was the drum of her heartbeat in her ears, and the hitch of her shuddering breath in her pale, bobbing throat.

And then normalcy had returned, crashing back in like a wave. She still had a book report to write, and math problems to solve. She still had dinner and chores and bathtime. She still had a home and a family. And her belongings had been pitched all about the hallway like some weird, sophomoric attempt at abstract art.

The adrenaline leaving her body had reduced her to trembles, but she was determined she was not going to cry. Not for Kenny Cantrell and not for Lester Cox. She'd crawled on her hands and knees to scoop up her papers and pencils and start stuffing them back into her books, but it'd been like her hands just wouldn't work right... like they'd been disjointed or disconnected from the whole of her body. Everything she'd picked up she just kept dropping.

Until little Jimmy Hopper began to stack them back up for her.

It hadn't been until he'd handed her the sum total of her things that she'd finally met his eye with her own.

Blue. Fathomless and nervous. Concerned... but safe. Shaded, even

then in his youth, beneath the heavy set of an avian brow that sported a wild shock of dusty, ashen-blond hair.

He'd turned his head when there came the muffled sound of a car door shutting outside, followed by the wordless skirling of frantic, boyish voices. The worthless little tattle-tales...

"Shit," Hop had sighed in submission, slumping his shoulders. "They're right. My dad's gonna kill me."

"B-but..." she remembered stammering at him, hugging her books so hard they'd pitted dents into the stringy meat of her arms. "But that's not right. It's not fair."

Hop had huffed an incredulous little puff of air through his nose, the way he always had with the mere suggestion of an unfortunate or preposterous falsehood. One hand kneaded the back of his neck.

"My dad doesn't believe in fair."

"But... he's a... isn't he a..."

"Yeah, yeah," he'd dismissed the notion of his father's chosen profession as he'd sauntered over to the doors to peek through the crack and look outside. "That just means he thinks he knows more about everything than anyone else."

"Well, he's wrong." And suddenly her body had stopped shaking. She'd grown rigid and taught, straight with purpose like an iron bar. A grave injustice had occurred, and she was going to set it to rights. "He doesn't know what you did. He doesn't know why - he doesn't know anything. I can fix this. I'll tell him everything - he'll listen to me. You won't get in trouble, you'll see - I promise. Come on."

And Joyce Byers just stood there, thirty years later, and smiled at her own reflection in the glass of that old photograph where her fingerprints smudged a mark next to the image of her friend in high school - tall and smiling and walking direct and forthright, the way he always had been. The way she herself had been that day she'd missed the bus as she'd grabbed him by his wrist, flung open both double doors, and tugged him along with her all the way up to the

toes of his father where he stood waiting next to his black-and-white painted police car.

"Jimmy! Get yer butt over here right now! We need to have a..." the man had begun, his voice trailing off at the sight of the tiny little lady that was marching down the sidewalk dragging his son behind her like a kite on a windless day.

Little seventh grade Joyce Landry could've made eye contact with Officer Hopper's nipples. She'd craned her neck to peer up at the giant tree trunk of a man and pinched a nerve, placing the sun directly into her eyes. Which had been better than staring straight up his nose, she supposed. But she hadn't let that stop her - she'd dressed that man down like she'd been his own mother. The words had tumbled out of her like a sobbing, hiccuping waterfall - her pleas had been heartfelt enough to qualify for a nomination from the Screen Actors' Guild for an Academy Award.

And when she was done, Officer Hopper had tugged at his pant legs and bent his knees to stoop down to their level. He'd just stared at his son for a moment, shaking his head as a gentle smile lifted the corner of his mouth. His eyes were as heavy-lidded and blue as his son's, whose were as wide as big, blue saucers at the time. Then the man had laughed... just the soft, bemused breath of surrender. He'd reached up and tousled Jimmy's hair and Joyce had finally allowed the fists at her sides to unclench.

"Aww, kid... what am I gonna do with you?" Jimmy had just smiled in return, wrinkling up the bridge of his nose. His father had turned a hand over between them. "Is all of this true? I mean it - I need you to tell me the truth because that kid's momma is gonna come screamin' into the station looking for me tomorrow."

Jimmy'd only mutely nodded his head, fervently enough to shake about his mussy mop of hair.

But Joyce didn't care about Lester Cox's mom. She still didn't. True to her form then as much as now, she couldn't keep her mouth shut.

"I think my mom has a few things she'd like to say, too."

Officer Hopper had knitted together his eyebrows as he'd turned to face her, mildly taken aback by her flippant assertiveness. But she knew she was right. She was the victim there, and he was the police. He was supposed to help *her*, to hell with Lester Cox and Lester Cox's mom.

"What's yer name, girl?" he'd asked her simply. "Who's yer mom?"

And that was the moment it'd hit her. She should've been home with her mother. She should've been parked at the kitchen table, pencil scribbling furiously while she sucked down a glass of ice cold milk. Her mouth should've been salivating over the smell of her mother's spaghetti. Her eyes had started to water as she'd stumbled back a couple steps. She'd turned a bewildered circle, noticing how long the shadows had started to grow, and how quiet the streets had become. How desolate...

"Hey now, sweetheart, it's okay - what's the matter? Just tell me your name. We can figure this out."

"I-I..." she'd blubbered incomprehensibly. "My mom doesn't know I've missed the bus... I don't know how I'm going to get home..."

"It's okay, it's okay. It's alright. This is not a problem - I can get you home. Just -"

"Ooo! Oo ooo!" Hop had exclaimed suddenly, startling her by grabbing back her hand. "Can we ride in the back?!"

"Huh? Well... uh... I dunno, Jimmy. That all depends. Are you gonna mess with the leg shackles again?"

"No, I won't, I swear."

"You promise me? I'm not kidding around, boy - you remember what happened last time, don't you?"

"Yes dad."

"I'm serious. I want you to promise me you'll leave them alone." He shook his finger in his face. "I want you to *nod your head at me* and tell me, 'Yes, dad, I promise.'"

"Yes, dad, I promise!" Jimmy had quickly complied.

"Good grief, kid..." his father had sighed, massaging his forehead as he'd opened the door for them to climb in. "You're gonna be the death of me."

But it'd been so typical of their relationship. Officer Hopper loved his son fiercely, and Jim Hopper idolized his father. But the idea of an upbringing in the Hopper family household had been a strict one... which naturally made a part-time incorrigible rebel out of little Jimmy Hopper. And that was the element that had cemented their strange little friendship, even beyond that day. There were parts of her parents that Joyce had wanted to distance herself from as well. Which was probably an instinctive impulse squirming in the brain of just about any child. But walking her safely to her bus stop every day had slowly turned into shared cigarettes beneath the bleachers in the gymnasium. Which had become snowball fights in winter. Which had become muddy shoes down by the river in the spring, or harassing the pregnant cattle grazing in the pastures outside of town, or staying out past curfew.

He'd become her dearest friend - a partner in crime, an adventurous accomplice. But she hadn't needed the flush of puberty to alert her to the fact that there was something else going on... way down below. Far, far beneath. And it felt like a fire. It still did.

Like the fire they'd seen on their way to the Landry family residence that day... the day she'd missed the bus. Hawkins Police Department had always been small, coordinating more often with the county sheriff for activities taking place in the rural jurisdictions. It'd been that way even when Hop was still... even when Hop was still around. And while his father hadn't been their only man on duty that day, he had been the only one in the vicinity to respond to the disturbance.

Hop had been in the middle of a long-winded explanation on how the leg shackles worked - he'd been waxing poetic for the better part of the past fifteen minutes on grandly exaggerated tales of violent crimes and the mad men who'd committed them, which had been a segue from his light commentary on his dad's very real, very loaded .38 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver - when the crackle of radio static had grabbed Joyce's attention. It should've most likely been a prank

or a mild case of vandalism. It shouldn't have taken more than twenty minutes to secure the scene and take a statement. It should only have been a mild inconvenience. Officer Hopper had responded to the summons and asked dispatch to contact the operator and relay a message back to the Landry family that he would have their daughter home before dinner.

When they'd pulled up to the house in question, the old lady who'd lived there was already on her porch in hysterics. She'd bellowed a virulent string of expletives that Joyce would never have believed could possibly come from such an upstanding, church-going citizen. Before she knew it, both her nose and Hop's had pressed themselves against the window in the back seat of the patrol car. She'd wiped the fog away to get a better view, and scowled up at Jimmy for mouth-breathing all over it. A small paper sack had been placed on the lady's front steps and set alight, and the perpetrators had long since disappeared.

Officer Hopper had held his hands high in a placating gesture as he did his best to verbally calm the woman's screeching tirade while slowly backing his way toward the trunk of his car. From there he'd retrieved a heavy, grey felted blanket that he kept for emergencies. Or small fires. He'd given the woman every assurance he could as he'd flung the blanket over burning paper sack, smothering the flames and stamping it with his feet hoping to see smoke rise, signalling and end to the potential for danger. But that wasn't what happened.

Something foul and putrid had leaked out in a small rivulet from beneath the edge of the blanket. And it had acted like the wick to a candle. It'd been like the fire was a living thing with a mind of its own and it would not be subdued - it would find a way, and found it it did. A tongue of flame licked down the little stream of noxious fluid and then suddenly it had climbed up the balustrade that lined the length of the veranda-style porch.

"Holy shit," Hop had muttered, his face perched next to her ear.

"I think that might literally have been shit," she remembered telling him.

And he'd laughed. Sweet merciful Jesus, how he'd laughed. And the urgency of the situation had just... drained completely away. Even as the woman on the porch nearly collapsed in light-headed horror, knotting her hands in the fabric of her dress over her heart. Even as Officer Hopper leaped backwards to fall off the stairs and sprawl all over his ass on the front lawn. Even as he'd torn chunks out of the prim and closely-trimmed sod to get himself righted back to his feet and race back to the radio in the patrol car. Nothing in the whole of the universe had sounded so fine as Jimmy Hopper's laughter at her silly, stupid joke.

To many, it might have seemed a small thing, a common thing. But not to Joyce Landry. Most kids her age had spent gratuitous hours of time cavorting with peers they'd called their friends, playing games and spreading gossip, catching motion pictures and drinking soda pop... developing social skills and reinforcing the bonds of relationships. But not Joyce Landry. Between having been too poor to partake in most recreational activities, and then having spent every summer vacation with extended family in California picking fruit to make good money... she'd felt she had very little to offer by way of long-term friendship.

It'd been so difficult to get people to wander into her life, and so often they walked in and right back out again. Even what little companionship she'd manage to gain throughout the course of a single school year would be lost by the time the summer was over and the bell tolled the mark of the following year. She'd be replaced by someone who was home, local... accessible. By someone whose parents had given them the privilege of a weekly allowance. So as she'd stood by the crooked mailbox that heralded the edge of the ramshackle Landry family property, as she'd watched Jimmy Hopper wave goodbye to her as his eyes peeked up over the car door where the words, "Serve and Protect," could be read proudly in gilded letters, she wondered how long it would take before her new friend forgot her too.

Joyce Byers let her hand fall away from the photograph, the one that had nailed his soul to the wall in the long high school hallway. She couldn't see it anymore, her eyes had clouded with tears as dark and stormy as the rain pelting the windows. That was never in Jim

Hopper's nature. Jim Hopper was a guardian, a protector, and there had never been a day since *that* day, the day she'd missed the bus, when he hadn't been seen skulking around the door of her locker waiting for the final bell to ring.

He'd become her rock, her anchor. Her island. And as the world kept turning on its axis and everything around them began to change, he was the one thing she'd been determined would always remain the same. Even as politics shifted. Even as music took on a different sound. Even as hairstyles evolved, clothing styles evolved, common turns of speech evolved... even as children got older and started getting in trouble with their parents more often... even as their own bodies began to change, even as she saw him on their first day as freshmen in high school and suddenly he was six feet tall with facial hair and broad, tanned shoulders... even as the sight of him made her swallow and put a heat inside her that frightened her, she was determined to keep him the same. Pristine and unblemished.

She was determined to put the blanket over the fire.

A very complicated, messy fire.

But that hadn't kept their friendship from changing... had it?

A sudden bark of laughter brought her back to her surroundings again. Joyce withdrew a kerchief from her purse to blot her eyes as a door down the hallway opened and shut, unfurling a billowing curtain of sounds and smells that originated from the gymnasium beyond. From the short glance she'd gotten, it appeared that scores of round tables had been arranged across the greater length of the basketball court, having been decorated with lavish tablecloths, kitschy centerpieces, and the shadows of overhead balloons and streamers cast by a glittering disco ball. It was a terribly tacky caricature of itself and nothing she wanted any part of... but the dinner was a catered meal. And her inner impoverished seventh grader still had difficulty turning down free food.

She found a seat on the fringes with two men she didn't remember, and whose wives she knew even less. She nursed a glass of weak, dry champagne and watched as people milled all around her in a featureless, completely forgettable mass - nothing more than a sea of

glitzy taffeta and gaudy rayon blends, balloon sleeves and shoulder pads... big glasses and feathered hair and white suit jackets and rolled up pant legs and sockless loafers. The air was a confusing, asthmatic miasma of dry ice, AquaNet, cigarette smoke, and Electric Youth. Joyce Byers didn't want to discuss her sales figures with the men at her table, or her net value or her annual bonus. Joyce Byers didn't want to talk about their wives' forty-five dollar ballet slipper purchases for the kids, or scrapbooking their family photos from their last cruise to the Bahamas, or the latest celebrity gossip about Madonna or Kim Basinger. She didn't even want to talk about the Iran-Contra affair or the Challenger tragedy, or even the recent Chernobyl disaster - at least not with these people.

She didn't want to smell Bill Hogue's cigar smoke, or listen to him shout about the glory days of high school football to Harvey Killingsworth and John Friedrich until he was red-faced and wheezing, and hacking up his lungs.

She didn't want to listen to Chrissy Carpenter laugh far too loudly and ostentatiously as she tossed her over-processed hair around to conspicuously show off her new diamond earrings.

She didn't want to make eye contact with Peggy who was making the rounds to every table, ensuring all in attendance were having a flawless, perfect time.

She didn't want to play this game of social Monopoly. But then it grew quiet. Then the lights went down and people took their seats. Then the overhead projector came on, sending a blazing beam of light through hazy, floating clouds of smoke to plaster the images of a slideshow up against a giant, hanging screen.

It was a memorial. Of course it was. It was Memorial Day weekend. And their collective high school graduating classes had lost their fair share of members to some very strange, very unfortunate... very *recent* turns of events.

The catering staff began weaving between the tables, bent low and whispering questions about food allergies and preferences from the menu, scarcely being heard over the gymnasium P.A. blaring vapid and idiotic love songs that had been popular back in the late 1950s

and early 60s. But it was too late - Joyce Byers had already lost her appetite. This wasn't working. This was a terrible idea. She should never have come. She'd come here in the hopes of feeling alive again, in recapturing some lost, archaic fragment of youth and memory - in the hopes of finding a reason to let this pain in her heart go, to finally let it subside. But not to confront the specter of death at every turn.

And the audacity of it. The brazen, unmitigated nerve of it. The way that merciless demon of death would stare her down in challenge through the eyes of each missing person clicking their way across that screen, as if she hadn't had enough. The way its presence was felt in each empty seat. So many of them gone. There were so many she didn't know, and even more that had passed decades ago, between car accidents and other common misfortunes. But then there were those that were lost to the Mind Flayer. And all of them were like a sledgehammer to her heart, squashed beneath equal parts grief and empathy.

Some deaths we're all born expecting as a part of the natural order of things - grandparents and eventually aunts and uncles and mothers and fathers. It's not outside the realm of possibility to watch a brother or sister, or even a spouse, breathe their last one day.

But no one expects to plan a funeral for their son.

No one expects to watch a significant other get devoured and disemboweled. No one expects to be kept awake night after night, haunted by the memories of those kinds of screams. Wet. Guttural. Animal.

And certainly no one expects to destroy a secret Russian doomsday machine hidden in a bunker a mile beneath the local mall, and utterly...

She couldn't finish the thought. She'd been completely derailed. She would've laughed to herself if she didn't feel like dying on the inside. It was just... crazy. But Bob Newby's photograph was next. She still didn't remember much of him as a child, although she was thankful for the man he'd become, and the time that she'd gotten to spend with him. She was surprised by how thick his hair had looked, and by how many little dotted freckles had bespeckled his cheeks and nose.

Small wonder such a wholesome man had grown from such a wholesome boy.

But then the projector clicked. The next image swung into view. A murmur rumbled through the crowd like a roll of springtime thunder. And the air just left Joyce Byers... just blew away with the wind as she steepled her fingers against her lips and the tip of her nose. She wasn't ready to see Hop like this. Not like this. She wasn't ready.

Her insides just burned to ash. Sadness like smoke was rising in her throat, threatening to choke the life from her as the wan light from his crinkled, blue-eyed smile cast a soft, ivory glow across the silvery field of linen tablecloths.

Nobody knew what she was going through. Nobody understood. Even she didn't understand it. She didn't understand why his death seemed so much harder than all of the... all of the others. She'd thought the death of her son would land her drooling and wailing smack dab in the middle of an asylum's padded walls... but Hop had been there to hold her. She'd known her son was still alive, even in the case of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, and no one else believed her - even Hop didn't at first - but he'd still been there to help her. And hold her. And while Hop had reserved his surly opinions about her relationship with a man like Bob Newby, he was the one who had dragged her to safety, to be sure she hadn't become the next casualty.

And then he'd held her.

He was the one who'd rescued her on the day she'd missed the bus. He was the one she'd spent her first summer in Hawkins with, after her father had returned alone to California because her mother had taken a desk job as a medical transcriptionist. He was the one who'd held her when she'd learned her father wouldn't be coming back.

He was the one who was the constant in her life - a fixture, like a sturdy piece of furniture - as she'd started to discover what love meant. To a teenage Joyce Landry, her limited experience with people and men had taught her that love was supposed to hurt, and that sometimes men would leave. So she'd loved the men who would leave her, and she'd locked Jimmy Hopper in a cage where he would stay and stay and stay. She'd put him in a place where she could

always find him when she needed him... particularly when Lonnie Byers had come into her life.

So, was that it then? Was it simply that she no longer had that firm shoulder, that fuzzy chin, that warm space that smelled of laundry soap and coffee and nicotine and safety that she could cry against for hours? Was it simply because Jim Hopper was the last one she ever dared to expect the specter of death would come along and try to steal from her? Was it simply because he was the one person who had managed to stay in her life for so long? Was it only because he was her dearest, sweetest friend?

Or was it because she felt guilty that she'd needed so much from him, and given so little in return... even in the times when he was the one that had really needed it? Even when he'd been there to help her through her suffering... after he'd suffered through his alone?

Or was it the fact that she was the one who had stood there and looked him straight into those bright, blue eyes, glistening with unshed tears over all of the love he knew would go on unrequited, and she still turned those keys? That she was the one who had to stand there and stare at him, and commit the act of murdering him?

Or... even more... was it that one little ember she'd spent a lifetime struggling to kick back under that blanket and smother...? That weird, hot little thing that she'd never quite been able to fully ignore...?

Trying not to cause a scene at her table with people she didn't really didn't know, she stifled a sob that threatened to escape her by digging through her purse. She didn't know what she was looking for as she rifled around her wallet, her checkbook, her keys, her lipstick, a compact mirror and some wet wipes... she just wanted a reason to turn her face away and let her tears fall for just a moment. People were whispering all around her. It was no surprise, Hop was well known in the community and had been liked by many in his youth, before... *things* came along in his life that embittered and tarnished him. Things like war. Things like divorce. Things like... Sara.

But as a young man he'd been a loud yet amiable, solid C average student. The Hawkins High School teaching staff had always been

begrudgingly fond of him in spite of themselves. Which wasn't to say he hadn't been responsible for his fair share of typical teenage antics, but he'd always owned up and paid his dues, and he'd always apologized. Because his father had made him. But Jim Hopper could always have been counted on to lift heavy equipment or retrieve out-of-reach items in the top cupboard, or even kill a spider for the lady at the front desk from time to time. Jimmy never longed for friends. He was the kind of boy that had a full mustache at fifteen, and was buying beer at seventeen. Jimmy Hopper could take his dad's car down to the river on a Friday night and just wait for the party to show up.

So it stood to reason a lot of people had some things to say when Jim Hopper's face showed up against that screen, aside from his civic position in law enforcement and public service. But it was when she overheard Chrissy Carpenter moan softly to herself, hoping anyone and everyone could hear her, that it was such a shame so few had really known him the way she had... that was when Joyce felt like throwing up. She tossed the rest of the champagne down her throat, she wiped her face against the sleeve of her light knitted sweater, she snatched up her purse, she pushed back her chair with a loud squawk, and she bolted through the double doors into the hallway.

She marched aimlessly and blind down one corridor and then the next, still expecting to see him around every turn and corner just... leaning against the wall, his face shadowed by the rim of his hat, lifting a cigarette to his mouth. But he was never there, so she kept on running, in search of either a bathroom or an exit. An escape. She just had to get... anywhere. It didn't matter where. Somewhere where she didn't envision slamming Chrissy Carpenter's face into the edge of a round, tastelessly decorated table. Jesus Christ, the only reason why Jim Hopper ever put his dick in that woman was because she practically perched herself on top of him. She was the one who'd flagged him down while he was cruising the strip in his dad's car. Joyce was positive he didn't open the door for her for the witty conversation...

Not like the times they'd spent exploring back roads, screaming with the windows down to Ritchie Valens or the Drifters, or staring at stars. Filling his dad's trunk with beer cans and confiding in each

other secret dreams and future plans. Joyce was willing to bet Chrissy Carpenter never caught his deep blue eyes lingering on her a just little too long before he shyly pulled them back to his lap with a smile. Chrissy Carpenter didn't know shit about Jim Hopper.

But what did Joyce Byers really know?

She found a red exit sign and followed it like a beacon. She flung both doors open and stomped out of that air conditioning and straight into the blinding rain. She knew she looked like a kook just standing there, head bowed and arms straight, just standing there beneath those punishing sheets of rain but she didn't care. The whole town thought she was a kook anyway, it was par for the course. She needed that rain. She needed the pain. She needed the guilt. She needed the regret. She needed the cold soaking through her clothes and straight into her bones. She needed something, anything, that would still the blade cutting deep into the heart of everything she didn't know about Jim Hopper... her hero. Her sweet friend.

All that she could have known... but didn't. The ways she could have known him if she hadn't locked him in that cage.

Lightning struck - this time somewhere nearby, causing her to leap out of her skin. Rationally she knew she couldn't stand in the rain all night so she resigned herself to the task of trudging through the mud and the wet grass back to the parking lot, while digging through her purse for her keys. She sat in the driver's seat for even longer, hugging the steering wheel and fogging up the windows, listening to the water hammer and cascade down the protective steel cage of the vehicle. Her mind was buzzing like electricity down a wire, zooming through images and faces and memories... and pausing briefly on another night... another night in a car with fogged windows.

"No," she chastised herself, shaking her head and whipping her wet hair around, flinging water everywhere. "No." She jammed the key in the ignition and lit the fire under the hood.

And she just... drove. She kept the windshield wipers moving, she kept her headlights pointed in front of her, and she just kept driving. Her hands gripped the steering wheel so hard they turned white, so hard they ached. She passed back by the cemetery where the stone

that proved his existence lived, but his body didn't. She turned down the street by the diner where she used to see his Blazer parked on mornings when he was too tired to care for himself, so he'd chosen to let some waitress behind a bar do it for him like a street alley tom cat. She made it past the police station, eyeing the lights on inside while ignoring the flutter in her belly - she knew he wasn't in there anymore and would never be again. She knew they missed him too. She wondered who'd taken his place.

She pulled up to the red light on Main Street, down the old commercial drag. Through the running, obfuscating veil of rain it was tough to make out the shape of the awning outside of Melvald's General Store and Pharmacy... but she knew it was there. Like a ghost limb. And while she waited for the light to change, holding her breath to keep from heaving her cries, she remembered the day she'd seen him sitting at this light.

She'd heard rumors that Jim Hopper had moved back to Hawkins... alone. A decorated Vietnam war veteran, medals of valor, courage in combat. A big, fancy career as a homicide detective in a big, fancy city like New York. He was big stuff and it'd been a big deal. But when she'd seen him, looking out the window as he'd pulled up to the light in his big, brown Blazer, the chief of police... home again to lick his wounds... he'd been a shell of his former self. Jim Hopper had always been a big man, but everything inside him - inside his face, his eyes, the gaunt of his cheeks - everything about him had seemed so small. Shrunk. Dessicated... and hollow. Like an old furnace in the wintertime whose pilot light had blown out. Nothing like the young man she'd said goodbye to at the bus station, years earlier, when he was still vibrant and alive - hopeful, yet... terrified.

She remembered, too, the day he'd come inside the store. The day he'd seen her again for the first time. She'd known then what he'd come for, but she hadn't wanted him to know she knew. Earlier that morning she'd been restocking the gum next to the register at the pharmacy counter while the pharmacist had been filling and bagging prescriptions. She'd seen his name. She'd seen the word "tuinal," and she'd known what it meant. She knew what it was used for. She knew the demon he was fighting. So seeing her there when he'd come to pick it up had caught him by surprise.

He'd lifted his head and the shadow from the brim of his hat had receded from his face. He'd taken the thing off, lips parted, and his eyebrows had climbed. Some color had returned to his cheeks as she'd smiled at him, and he'd looked like maybe he'd recovered a little castaway piece of his ancient home again in that moment, whereas before he'd looked so lost and out of place, like he'd been on autopilot and functioning only on stimulants, anti-anxiety pills, alcohol, and involuntary reflexes. It'd broken her heart to see her friend like that. It'd killed her even more when he'd asked her out for a drink to catch up... but she'd known that her husband, Lonnie, would never have let her out of his sight with a man like Jimmy Hopper.

At least... not again.

So she'd apologized to him. She'd watched his face fall as he'd nodded his understanding. She'd watched him put that hat back on, watched the shadows once more slide over and darken his sad, tired blue eyes. She'd left for lunch so that she could preserve his dignity, allowing him to pick up the bottle without her prying eyes. And he'd become an old acquaintance that she'd wave to in traffic from time to time.

Her dearest, sweetest friend.

And that fire just burned under that blanket.

Her tires squealed against the wet pavement when the light turned green. She raced dangerously through town, careening through intersections and hydroplaning over steadily growing puddles. She flew past the elementary school, the post office, the City Hall, the mall... she tore past the park, the Methodist Church, the public pool... past the trailer he moved into when he came home, destitute and alone... past her old crooked mailbox, past cow pastures, past sledding hills... but Jim Hopper was everywhere. Jim Hopper was Hawkins, Indiana. And no matter how fast she flew down those streets, Jim Hopper would never be there. He was everywhere and nowhere - a ghost. And she wasn't sure if she was being chased by that ghost... or if she was the one chasing it.

Before she crossed the line marking the city limit, she drove past the old bus station where she'd found him before he'd left for boot camp.

She'd run at a break neck pace to catch him that day from all the way across town, on foot because she would never have been able to ask Lonnie Byers for a ride to say goodbye to her friend. Not for Jim Hopper. But when she'd gotten there she'd flung herself at him, red-faced and sweating and panting and nauseous, and she'd thrown her arms around that warm neck and that freshly shaven chin, pleading with him to come home in one piece. Even then she'd been able to see the fear in his eyes... and the love. But then they'd pulled away from each other, and pushed that feeling down, way down, so far down back where it belonged. Ignored and forgotten. Smothered. And he'd just smiled at her and promised he would.

But he didn't. He'd come home to New York instead. And she'd gone to Chicago to go to school. She'd let Lonnie Byers convince her to come home and marry him. They'd had two sons. And Hop had married Diane... and then Sara happened. Time had come along to twist them into something older, colder, and more cynical. Something dead inside, and numb.

Until grief snuck out like a tiny tongue of flame, climbing up to set fire to the balustrade.

Out of nowhere a road sign swam into view out of the black and raging deluge. Joyce slammed on her brakes and strafed to a skidding stop. She knew the road. She knew it well. But she didn't want to look at it. So she sat cockeyed on the dividing line of the gloomy, nighttime, two-lane rural highway in the middle of a thunderstorm just idling, letting her engine rumble and hum. She watched the humidity rising in her headlights. She watched her breath bloom against the windshield in cloudy grey puffs of condensation.

She remembered the fogged up windows.

Lonnie Byers hadn't come from Hawkins. He'd been a sexy, intoxicating enigma. By contrast, the local boys had lacked mystery and were too safe. Boys like Jim Hopper. Joyce Landry hadn't been ready for a more adult, more real concept of long-term love, it hadn't been a dial on the dashboard for her. Back then love was danger and excitement and risk, and it was fleeting. Love was an older boy from out of town with a fast car and a leather jacket.

Love was a boy who kept tabs on her through phone calls and verbal abuse... through a ceaseless litany of apologies and cheap gifts. Love was a boy who would strip her of her agency - love was a boy who assumed complete control over her movements and activities, to show much he cared for her and worried over her. Love was a boy who'd gotten her bleary-eyed, catatonic drunk on a bottle of Peach Schnapps, then kicked her out of the car when she wouldn't give him a blow job.

In the middle of a two-lane, rural highway.

Which was where Jim Hopper had found her, stumbling and staggering as she'd tried to cry herself sober, walking alone until she'd hopefully found the crooked mailbox at the end of her property line. But when she'd gotten in the car, she'd begged him not to take her home. Her mother would have murdered her to see her in her state - her dress askew, her hair matted and messed, her makeup streaked with tears. So Jimmy Hopper had taken her down that road.

That road marked by the sign.

That road fed a line of charming split level ranches now. A small, affluent, country subdivision where a congressman lived, and a surgeon from the local hospital. But back then it'd been a shaded, dusty little lane that'd wound its way down to a popular fishing hole by day... and a clandestine spot for underaged sex by night. But it had also been a quiet spot where they could go and talk without being bothered, noticed, or interrupted. They'd only been there five minutes before Hop'd fired up his engine again, ready to hunt the bastard down and do the same thing to him that he'd done to Lester Cox, years before. But instead of yanking ineffectually at his arm or the steering wheel to stop him... Joyce had climbed on top of him instead.

And in the middle of the haunted, silent, solitary night - in the middle of the road, no less - Joyce Byers rested her head against her steering wheel, tears sliding down her face as she stared down that road and remembered what it'd felt like to grip her thighs around his. She remembered the heat overtaking her as she'd ground her hips into him - she could still feel the hard length of him responding beneath her. She remembered his sharp inhale when she'd shoved his

shoulders with both hands back into his seat and stared straight into his blue eyes. She remembered the uncertainty that had shone from them in the moonlight, and the confusion. She remembered the fog on the windows.

It hadn't just been the alcohol that had made her do what she did. It'd been the veranda-style porch on fire. It'd been the panicked call to dispatch. It'd been the thrill at the sheer debacle of it. It'd been the *urgency*. The need. It'd seared her beneath her skin. Beneath the blanket.

So she'd kissed him. He couldn't get in fights with Lonnie Byers if his mouth was busy so she'd kissed him. The situation had been handled, the threat of violence had been assuaged, and nothing bad would've happened that night because... she'd kissed him. Or at least that's what she'd told herself. She'd pulled away and stared at him, but instead of looking consumed by a long-suppressed lustful desire the way she'd expected, he'd seemed sad and scared instead, so she'd kissed him again, but this time softer. Slower. Deeper. She'd brought her hands up to cup his jaw and she'd kept her lips brushing against his for what'd felt like an eternity. Soft. Like silk.

And he'd finally kissed her back. She remembered his breath on her face, and the gentle sweep of the hair on his lip and his chin. She remembered how light and sweet he'd tasted. She remembered the way he'd closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to hers, nuzzling the tip of her nose with his own. Oh, how she'd give anything to have that face back now, to hold and kiss and touch and sway.

But then she'd nibbled a hot, wet trail down his neck... and he'd asked her to wait. She'd stuffed her hands underneath his shirt to smooth them over his stomach and his chest, and he'd told her no. And when she'd undone the button on the fly of his jeans, fiddling around looking for the zipper pull, he'd clamped his hands around her wrists and -

"Stop." He'd been breathless and swallowing hard, his eyes bright beneath his heavy brow. "Not like this," he'd whispered. "You're drunk. I... I-I can't."

The steering wheel was a pale substitute for his body now, and

nothing like the memory of how she'd sunken herself down to curl up against his solid warmth... resting her head back onto that shoulder and closing her eyes like she'd done so many times... so incredibly and invariably... safe. Nothing could erase the memory of looking out her bedroom window, expecting to watch him drive away after he'd dropped her off only to see him still sitting there, parked next to the crooked mailbox, hugging his steering wheel the way she was now, and staring forlorn at the road before him.

The road that took them away from each other. The road that forked, east and west, carrying them off into separate lives as they grew up, grew apart, and became damaged and hardened adults. The same road that brought them back as different people. The same road that crossed their paths when all hell in Hawkins began to break loose.

When her son had gone missing... and her head had found its way to his shoulder once more.

And now that shoulder was gone, replaced by nothing so intangible as memory, heartache, and remorse. But that fire... the fire under the blanket still burned, as hot as it ever had.

So she left the road sign behind. She pushed the gas pedal and kept on driving, and didn't stop until her headlights had landed on the cabin. *His* cabin. His dad's old cabin, the one tucked away, hidden safely in the deep, dark woods. The thing had been left a ripped and jagged ruin, with giant tears through its ceiling and walls exposing its inner sanctum to the elements. Caught in the stark white beams of halogen light, she could see a pair of shoes still left behind on the porch... she could see the end of the couch inside the doorway, growing soggy in the falling rain - the couch where she'd nursed him once, shortly before... shortly before he died. She could hear water dripping from the phone line, hear the raindrops pinging the windchimes. It should have felt like a home, but instead it felt like a tomb.

He should be here now, muttering and grumbling over the mess. He should be here, inanely pacing with his hands threading through his hair, unable to articulate a plan through his own inability to manage his stress. He should be here all, all... all gruff and wound like a tight spring, barking meaningless orders while consumed by his concern

for the well being of his daughter. He should be here calling her, calling his friend, pleading for help, sorting his priorities, looking for safety... looking for a home. He should be here failing miserably, but trying so hard in spite of himself.

She missed his shortcomings. She missed his nervous temper. She missed his needs and wants. She missed his smell. She missed his firm shoulder, the warm, smooth crook of his neck, and his fuzzy chin. She missed the efforts he threw into things that were important to him. She missed the crinkled smile that had finally begun to reach his eyes again, ever since things like color and companionship and love had started to leak back into his heart. She missed old songs and stupid jokes... the smell of gunpowder... a car with the top down on a starry night... the feel of his fingers laced through hers.

She missed the feel of her lips brushing against his for what'd felt like an eternity.

She missed the opportunity... the opportunity to tell him all of the things she should have, long ago, but didn't because she was afraid. Afraid of losing him... anyone but him... her dearest, sweetest friend.

But it didn't change anything. It didn't make it go away. It wasn't something to be ignored, and for that she could never forgive herself. She had to say it, she had to confess it. She'd be haunted by his ghost forever if she didn't confront this and face it. It was too late to tell him now... but she still could tell herself. So she opened the door and stepped back out into the rain.

And she pulled the blanket off of the fire and let it burn away into the night. Let it take the whole damned house down, she didn't care.

She lifted her face to the heavens, fighting to keep her eyes open as the rain battered and stung them. A long, white-hot web of lightning fanned its way through the clouds above, throwing gnarled and clawed shadows around the trees. She closed her eyes and let them take her, let the wind twist her wet skirt around her legs, let the water soak her hair and remove any trace of what remained of her light mascara.

"I love you," she began, croaking weakly around the knot in her

throat. But the blanket was gone, it was too late, it was out in the open air. The fire was alive now, and no tempest gale was going to be strong enough to extinguish it. She fell to her knees in the mud. She spattered her dress with mud. She dug her fingers into the mud - she tightened her fists in the mud. And she screamed.

"I love you, Jimmy Hopper!" And she cried. She cried so hard it shook her, so hard it stole the breath from her. So hard she was certain she could've been heard clearly in the next county. But it felt so good to finally let this out. "I've loved you since the seventh grade!"

She'd loved him for thirty years. She'd loved him all of her life. The only reason she'd never allowed herself to share that love with him, the way he deserved, was because she'd been afraid of losing him. Losing him like her father... like every friend she'd ever made... like Lonnie Byers. Like Bob Newby. She was afraid he'd become something that would hurt her and then leave her, or something that would be devoured because of her. And she never once stopped to truly see and admit to herself just how permanent Jimmy Hopper had already become.

It should have been him. It should always have been him. If she'd wanted to keep him so badly, she should have just married him. She'd been so afraid of losing him and yet...

And yet she'd lost him *anyway*.

So now, here she was, her knees sinking into the mud outside of the desecrated crypt that once was his home, overflowing with the words she should have told him long ago, burning and burning and burning from the inside out until she completely withered away. Here she was, willing to make any bargain with any god or devil that would put him back in her arms to hold once more... just one more time.

"It should've been you," she whispered, rising to her feet as the rain began to ebb away and the thunder began to grow more distant. "It should always have been you. I'm so sorry." She smacked her hands together and kneaded them into her skirt to clean the mud from them before she used their backs to wipe her eyes. She wrung out her hair, but didn't give a second thought to the mess she'd made of herself. There was still time for a long, hot cry in a long, hot motel bathtub

before Will and El would need to be picked up. With a wistful smile, she gave the cabin one long, last look and nodded her final goodbye to everything her friend had been, and never got to be, before she climbed back into the car and drove away.

It wasn't until the weekend was over and the car was getting packed to hit the highway that Will said something very... peculiar to her.

"Can we drive back by the old house before we go?" he'd asked her.

"Of course, sweetheart," she'd assured him as she'd passed her hand through his hair and kissed the top of his head. She'd then bent to pick up the cooler and drop it into the trunk. "We can't hang around, though. We've got a long drive ahead of us. And I don't want to freak the new tenants out."

"They're not there anymore," Will had muttered absentmindedly, flinging his backpack into the back seat.

"Huh... that's weird." She'd stretched the small of her back while Jonathan lifted the heavy suitcases. "They can't have been there for more than six months. How did you find out -"

"Mike told me. He knows the kid who used to live there. Said the place gave 'em the creeps," he'd shrugged at her.

Joyce had tried not to take offense... she'd spent half her life savings fixing up that house, and several painstaking hours preparing it for its new owners, sometimes even cleaning it in places with a toothbrush. She'd thought it was a perfectly fine house...

"He said it's haunted," El had told her, stepping around the back of the vehicle while wrapping a brightly colored scrunchie around her ponytail. "What's 'haunted?'"

"Like Acererak from the Tomb of Horrors," Will had replied.

"Lich?"

"Demi-lich."

Joyce had laughed to herself as she'd taken the girl's mixed up face in

her hands.

"There's no such thing as ghosts. Or demi-liches. Do you have your backpack?" The girl had nodded. "Let's go."

So their last stop before crossing the city limits had landed them there, parked in front of the "For Sale" sign at the end of the lot, staring out the windows at their old, empty house. So much living done in that house. So many tears and smiles and laughs and fights. So much time spent figuring out how to make it work. So many sleepless nights, tossing and turning in worry. So much growing and living and changing. She missed that old house.

But then, right before her eyes... a light came on. And then back off. Like... it flickered.

"Wait," Jonathan breathed with his fingers pressed against the glass. "Did... did you see that...?"

As if on cue, it did it again. The same as last time. There was a pattern.

"Wait, is...?" Will asked. "Is that Morse code?"

The light flickered again and again. The same pattern over and over. And El began to cry. Joyce turned to her in confusion.

"Honey, what's the matter? Why are you..."

The girl was tapping her fist on the dashboard. Tapping out the pattern in the lights.

Tap tap.

Tap.

Tap tap tap.

She clamped a hand over her mouth and sobbed.

"Papa..."